Hosting

with

Aileen Jogi mur.at Alice
Angeliki Cristina
Reni esc mkl varia
systerserver Yo Ezn
lever burns anarchaserver
Onur Uschi
servus.at

A conversation around collective hosting practices in the context of
art servers, community servers and feminist servers (Linz, June 2022).

This conversation took place at AMRO "Debug", organized by servus.at at afo architekturforum oberösterreich, to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and ideas about the practices of art hosting and cultural providers such as the ones managed by many of the members of the festival community. In this dedicated session, representatives of various experiences of art servers were invited to a conversation where to identify common traits between the various experiences and how needs and practices change over years.

This conversation involved art and cultural associations with an affinity for current topics of the information society, open source technologies and current developments in media and internet art. These initiatives can be described as "art servers" or "cultural data centers" who manage an independent internet infrastructure for their own community of artists and cultural workers. And through that very same infrastructure they investigate the aesthetic, social and political aspects of the internet.

You can read more about the conversation at: https://art-meets.radical-openness.org/program/hosting-with-the-others/

A [hwto] mailinglist was made after this session to continue the conversation. To subscribe contact: hwto-owner@lists.servus.at.

Aileen: (...) When Davide outlined a program proposal for AMRO22 in 2021 for funding applications, he included a section on Hosting With The Others. In the course of researching possible cooperation partners, he came across the event Art Servers Unlimited, organized by Manu Luksch and Armin Medosch in 1998 in London, so he contacted Manu Luksch, who responded with interesting and helpful suggestions. After I returned to Linz from Spain in late August 2021, I was very enthusiastic about Davide's proposal and his correspondence with Manu, which also reminded me of the exhibition and symposium Art Servers: Stargate to Net Culture, which Margarete Jahrmann had organized in Linz in 1999.

Davide then invited Onur and me to become involved in preparing this section of the program, and we had absolutely delightful team meetings at my place with lots of wine, peanuts, music, wonderful conversations, and interventions from my cat Ginevra (Ginevra is a high-strung, imperiously

demanding Austrian princess who expects nothing short of total and absolute devotion from "her" humans, and at some point she decided that Davide belongs to her now, so that was that.) Between Davide's correspondence with Manu, Varia and others, Onur's experience as sys admin at servus now, and my past experiences, so many fascinating questions started forming.

For me hosting is not a technical question, it has a lot of layers. If we move away from GAFAM [2] , what does that mean, what do we need?

Jogi: I am one of the founders at mur.at, founded in 1996/1997, an organisation that does hosting. Mur.at started as a networking project. In the 90s networking was not a given, mur.at provided access to the internet for artistic purposes. Currently mur.at turned into a member-based datacenter, mostly people from Graz, but also from all over the world.

Alice: I'm here as part of multiple projects: Varia, where we host our own services and slowly are realising (...). But I'm also here as part of ATNOFS, a traversal network of feminist servers, including Constant, Hypha, Romania, LURK and the Feminist Hack Meetings.

Angeliki: I'm also part of Varia, the ATNOFS project, and systerserver. At Varia, we try to rotate roles, making sure that women are not only the ones doing finances. Through ATNOFS (...) working on

questions around feminist server practices. It's
not always about hosting yourself, there are many
interconnections and dependencies on other
servers, including LURK for our mailinglist.
Systerserver runs at a server hosted at mur.at,
and for online gatherings me and other peers use
the BBB [3] at the servers of Constant.

Reni: I'm from Graz, part of ATNOFS, intergenera-
tional understanding of things. Different types of
we's, who is we? How can we create infrastructure
that is based on the things that we as groups actu-
ally need? What are other ways that this way of
hosting can be? I'm not coming from the technical
side, but I'm really interested to think what we
need. And also to support each other in finding
what we need.

Cristina: I'm also part of Varia, and part of the
ATNOFS project. I used to self-host my website at
home, but nowadays I'm more interested in collec-
tive hosting, for example as in Varia.
Homebrewserver.club meetings that were happen-
ing 5 years ago in Rotterdam have been important.
Other initiatives I have been involved in are:
Relearn and Bibliotecha. It feels important to high-
light all the existing practices, which were very
important for us. In Varia the hosting is mainly for
ourselves and accidentaly for others.

Vo Ezn: I am part of systerserver, AnarchaServer,
and I also homebrew my own server. I am also part

BBB is an open source web conferencing system.

of solisoft, a Rotterdam based collective for service providing. Organising workshops on my own server, in an environment made for introverts.

Uschi: You were dancing very close to our server room last night, it's very close to the dancing room. Servus has a membership thing running, which currently creates some problems. I'm very careful with mentioning the word "community", as it is different to connect to the members and the people at AMRO for example. How can we share responsibilities? When Peter died, it became clear that some people really hold a lot of knowledge, and it's difficult for them to share knowledge. Sharing knowledge sounds easy, but it is not.

Onur: I'm part of the Servus core team since 2019. The dualities that we have to deal with keep coming back. When you're trying to do things that are not for profit, in a space that is shaped by profit, you're already going against the stream. User expectations are based on smoothness, this creates friction. How do you stay calm when everyone is freaking out? I need to repeatingly say to myself: it's not my fault. Something went wrong in the system. My job is to deal with frustration, and when everyone is frustrated who reaches out to me, it's very frustrating. We're using the same tools that were created with profit in mind, but try to use it for non profit. Sharing knowledge, but maybe even more importantly, sharing the weight of this work, feels very important.

Aileen: Servus is around already for so long. I met young people that think that servus is only an email address. What are the frustrations that we experience when running servers and providing services?

Angeliki: Can i start? (laughing) For example, people rely on the Varia etherpad a lot and when it's down there is stress. In response, it's a strategy to send pictures of the server, say that the new hotglue printer took too much energy and that all the energy was down in the space, and it took a long time before everything was back. Also, we're artists and quickly overwhelmed and burning out, it's good to make these things visible.

Alice: I want to address what Uschi said about knowledge sharing. When joining Varia, it felt like the server work was not for me, the technical knowledge was a monolith. Through ATNOFS, it provided me with time to get involved in working with a server, to see the work inside it, and that there is space for making mistakes. We're not fully relying on the Rosa server[^rosa], it's mostly for documentation.

Onur: My title is sysadmin at servus, i am mostly self-educated when it comes to this knowledge. Documentation is the biggest topic of it all. There is always a loss in translation of the knowledge. And even more if there are people that don't want to share the knowledge. The dynamic changes

ROSA IS A TRAVELLING FEMINIST SERVER, DEVELOPED DURING ATNOFS, COLLECTING DOCUMENTATION AND TRACES OF PRACTICES FROM DIFFERENT PARTICIPATING GROUPS.

when a member's full infrastructure is down, specially in important moments, like when a newsletter is being sent out, there is a lot of pressure.

Reni: The contradictions in which we are, are manifold. Wanting to work in non-commercial ways, with free software, ... but at the same time, maybe we still work in capitalist manners, when we try to do so many things at the same time. I am my translation agency, my travel agency, etc. We're so used to everything being available all the time. Maintenance work is such a hard work. Enjoying the work with Rosa, it's great that it's not always available. Can this be a form of seasonable computing?

Jogi: At mur.at we host hundreds of websites and hundreds of organisations. The urgency is always there, someone needs something "right now". The biggest challenge is that we're underfunded. We need 3 or 4 times as many people to do the work. And then we can spend time on documentation. First the work needs to be done, and once everything is done, i can celebrate and document. Mur.at is a non-profit, a "verein". The verein owns the datacenter, the cable, machinery, everything. As a member you are the co-owner. You can self-host at Amazon or what, but you never own anything.

Natacha: It's important to communicate that self-hosting is not safer. The ones that lost their websites are small initiatives that don't have backups.

It's super important to communicate that this is not about security or safety, but about understanding and having a sense of control.

Aileen: Is it a question of how you define safety or security?

Jogi: That was a bad choice of words, data sovereignty is where it is all about.

Hellekin: I would like to insist on documentation and how it changed in the last 20-30 years. Tried to make people work together, but people barely stay afloat on top of their work.

Another interest point is single sign-in softwares. Back in the days there was RDAP, which worked. Now you have OpenID and others, software that is becoming more and more complicated. For example the Keycloak software by Red Hat, it's just too big. If you upgrade from one version to the next, it does not update. So another layer of dependency emerges, where you rely on free software companies.

Aileen: What has changed in sysadmin work?

Onur: Servus does not only have members that host their websites with us, but we also share the buidling with Radio Fro and STWST. Servus worked with a file server, so people would login to the fileserver and not on the computer itself. In every update, something breaks. We need to find

Many people are overworked, struggle with generating an income that meets the current costs for life.

Red hat is a large open source company.

ways around it. We slowly have to work with more shinier versions of software, that we understand less and less. I don't have time to dive in fully, so i need to go for the hacky solution. We're over-worked, pressured, always self-doubting if we're good enough in what we do. When my day starts with 3 things that do not work, and when it's fin-ished i have 5 more things that do not work, it's very depressing. When one person sends me an email at the end of the day, thanking for the work i did, it breaks this circle of negativity.

Angeliki: systerserver and AnarchaServer decided to host together. We meet online, in the terminal. We install a work system, for example something for backups. It's important to open up the process to more people from the collective to do the sysadmin work. I accept that the work is fragmented. Realising the reality, not only as sysadmin but as users, feels important. How can more people be in-volved in the sysadmin. How can the work be shared and made visible?

Luka: Is there a way to see what someone else is doing on the server?

Vo Ezn: Yes we use tmux, which is a shared termi-nal session. It allows us to do the work together. At the same time, we follow a ticket system on the git repository, and at the end of the session someone uploads the documentation.

Luka: I'm one of these guys that fails to share the knowledge, it's not an ego thing, i need to deal with it. It's great to see there is a new wave of hosting. I can remember the start of the web times, where a website was not a job or business, it was experimental. So if it went down, it was not such a big deal. What is an art server? Maybe it's easier for an art server to survive, compared to community servers. For Ljudmila[6] there is stable funding available through art, which makes it possible to actually sustain the work. The work was done voluntary for so many years. The server at Ljubljana is a debian server, it's running debian 5. Why? We don't dare to upgrade. As long as it works it's great. We have to work with migration eventually. Great to see so many women interested in this, and making it a social process. It has been a lonely place to be in.

Ljudmila is an Art and Science Laboratory that was established in 2010 as a successor to the Ljudmila-Ljubljana Digital Media Lab programme of open Society Institute slovenia (since 1994)

eeefff: (...) the anti-war initiatives, how did it affect the (...), proxy-ing, and a new term gap-ing. It's important to not only serve the content. Ways of hiding content from being blocked. Placing the content information in the server of the enemy. How to make this kinds of gap-ing(?) is crucial. In that context, it's not about self-hosting, but about how to use those gaps. Example of Telegram communication, which is useful and urgent for some contexts. How to provide proxies? As someone that is involved in self-hosting, it's difficult to deal with this, specially in the context of security. How to

fight back with proxy-ing and gap-ing? How to
make it more political (...)? More queer (...)? → *unfortunately
we are missing
some snippets
here and there:*

Angeliki: Interesting to think about this. In
Rotterdam we started an initiative called Digital
Solidarity Networks [7], which started as a re-
sources sharing initiative. The distribution of it
was important, exporting it into PDFs, websites,
etc. Crossing countries changed the need for me-
dia. USB sticks become important. Fragmentation is
important, to not have the illusion that one medium
works for everyone. Example of political groups in
Greece, who feel safer in Facebook groups. They
will not move to something like Mastodon because
they don't feel safe there. Many minorities go
around, they never take the straight way. If you
take the straight way you're in a good place
probably.

Cristina: Rosa uses a tunnel to a jump server. The
jump server is the access point of the network.
Maybe this relates to your question? Another thing
we have been talking about is mirroring [8] as a po-
litical gesture, or streaming someone else's radio
broadcast. As a way to interconnect different
networks.

Vo Ezn: The jump server is in NL, what happens if
that server is in Poland, how do the political but
also legal frameworks change?

Aileen: What kinds of resources are important to
share? Sharing know-how? What kind of support

↳ DSN is a shared listing of tools, practices and readings, for digital solidarity, conviviality and togetherness.

MIRRORS are replicas of other websites. The concept of mirroring applies to network services accessible through any protocol, such as HTTP or FTP.

does everyone wish from the others? Or what could you offer? We're trying to talk about hosting-with-others, to not create islands. What can we share?

Jogi: One thing is documentation, this is information and it's something we share. At mur.at we use ansible a lot. What you did in the terminal (...) before you write in playbooks (?), which we store in our gitlab. You can divide these playbooks between public ones and private ones. This can be done in informal ways, but this can also expand in the upcoming time.

Aileen: The point is to start this conversation.

Uschi: In the context of servus.at, as association and service, maybe it's time to say whom and what we want to host. Can we get rid of something? If we have members that don't understand what we're doing, should we keep them? Nobody needs a website anymore, maybe that is something to get rid of as well. The main point is, who do we want to host? For example, we're hosting the local tv initiative in Linz, and i really want to keep that and care for it.

Onur: Not so long ago we switched to a ticketing system. There are two sysadmins, and when one person is on holidays, we turn an auto-reply on. Recenlty someone felt attacked that there was an automatic reply system to send emails, instead of a real person. Maybe it's a reconsideration moment for us to see what we can do, of course we're cont-

inuing with this, we're doing this already for 20 years, but we're doing this with two sysadmins.

Reni: Need for slowing down, I don't want to follow the pace. A feminist server does not always need to be available.

Onur: Already having this conversation is making me feel less alone. When i go online, i am only surrounded by corporate environments, advising me to change jobs.

Question from audience: Onur's experience sounds totally different from the others. It seems that you're enjoying the technical learning and exploration.

Angeliki: With Varia, it's partially a service. We do need to keep the infrastructure up for using the etherpad, and nextcloud maybe, but mostly the etherpad. We're also artists, and we do need the services for ourselves. We do meetings every month, to keep the services alive. For the AnarchaServer and systerserver, they started as an initiative to host together, but they also provide services to other collectives.

Cristina: But there is a tension between staying in the experimental space to host with others, and starting to rely on infrastructure. We added a welcome text on the pads for example, that the pads can be instable. The sysadmins in theory can see and find all the pads that are made, or there can be

unexpected cosmic event. Recently we find out that a big organisation was using our etherpad for their event, and at the same day, the infrastructure group was planning to do a disk upgrade. Fortunatly did not work out that day, because we were not aware of this use. It was clear that we needed a mailinglist and get in touch with those people using our infrastructure. How to deal with this tension as "accidental hosters" [9] ?

Natacha: Framasoft could not persue serving the services in the pandemic unfortunately, as they were not state funded and could not carry the responsibility. There is also Chatons, a network of libre service providers. Is there a way to balance it? Is there a turning point when you can charge money for the services and when not?

Aileen: It's time for a lunch break. If you want to be involved in this conversation, also very much from the community side, please join the mailinglist. It's very much needed to involve different kinds of sides in the conversation.

This term refers to this awkward but often mice situation of providing someone a service as a side effect, sometimes even without knowing it.

This zine is released with a copyleft attitude: we support copying and redistributing this zine as it is, as long as you release it again under the same conditions. We would like to ask you to not modify the content, as it captures a moment of a situated discussion.

AMRO: Art Meets Radical Openness is a biennial festival for art, hacktivism and open cultures, organized since 2008 by servus.at in cooperation with the Linz University of Art, Department of Time-Based Media. https://art-meets.radical-openness.org

servus.at: promotes the use of free open source software, explores phenomena of digital culture, highlights socio-political implications in dealing with technology, and deals with central issues of the information society. https://servus.at

Varia: Varia is a Rotterdam based initiative, which started in 2017 from the need to open up their members' practices and organise ad-hoc public or semi-public moments among different configurations; at its core it aims at developing critical understandings of the technologies that surround us. https://varia.zone

mur.at: enables the networks of a wide variety of art and cultural initiatives in a (shared) virtual space. https://mur.at/

esc mkl: esc media art laboratory provides space and is at the same time a platform for experiments and projects. https://esc.mur.at/

systerserver: is run by feminists, using FOSS. It acts as a place to learn system administration skills, host services and inspire others to do the same. https://systerserver.net/

AnarchaServer: is a feminist server which contributes to the maintenance of autonomous infrastructure on the Internet for feminists projects. https://anarchaserver.org/

leverburns: is a —no-camera&&—no-audio environment [we-txt-&—terminal] for workshops / conversation sessions re:autonomous_practices for individuals and collectives][art < —————————————————> cultural production][https://leverburns.blue/

Printed: at Varia, on the HP LaserJet 9050dn

Paper: romandruk 90 grams, van Beek

Tools: octomode, Etherpad, Paged.js

Fonts: MetaAccanthis by Amélie Dumont, Polsku by Open Source Publishing, monospace, sans-serif

Transcription, editing, layout: Manetta Berends, Angeliki Diakrousi, Artemis Gryllaki

THANKS EVERYONE FOR THIS WONDERFUL CONVERSATION, WE HOPE THIS ZINE WILL SUPPORT THE ONGOING EFFORTS OF HOSTING WITH OTHERS IN CARING ENVIRONMENTS.